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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of personal pronouns by 6-year-old children. It was hypothesized that the child's use of personal pronouns would reflect an emphasis and awareness of the social self as actor and that the self as subject would be less salient. Subjects were 128 first or only children and their mothers. Five-minute conversations between mother and child were taped and replayed for the subjects in order to identify doubtful words for the typed transcript. Results indicated that the children preferred self reference pronouns (I, me, we, they). The pronoun most frequently used by the children was "I". Specific other pronouns (he, she, him, her), followed in usage, and references to the immediate other (you) were least used. In the mothers' speech, self references were less frequent than references to the child. Mothers' most frequently used pronoun was "you". References to the immediate other were followed in frequency by references to self and then by references to a specific other. Data are compared to data on the use of pronouns by college students and analyzed for their use in nominative and accusative forms. (SB)

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Pronouns and the Social Self in Mother-Child Conversation

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Pronouns and the Social Self in Mother-Child Conversation

Sociologists view language as the means by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. It is also viewed as the instrument through which the social self is developed (Cooley, 1902; Bain, 1936). Mead (1934), one of the leading contenders of this theoretical position, asserts that the child is born without a social self. Development of the social self results from family and peer group interaction where the child learns to take the role of the "significant" other and the "generalized" other. Out of these experiences, two components of the self develop: the "I" and the "me". For Mead, the "I" is the creative or spontaneous aspect of the self. It is sometimes called the acting self. The "me" is that part of the self that is an organization of the internalized attitudes of others. The "me" consciously registers and takes account of the attitudes of society. Of the two components, Mead asserts that the "I" is first to develop. That is, the child first becomes aware of himself as subject rather than object. No doubt, Mead derives his theoretical position in part from Cooley's (1902) earlier observations on the use of self-words by a child. With the birth of his third child, Cooley decided to keep a detailed record of her speech development with special attention directed towards pronoun usage. These observations suggest that normal use of self-words seems to have been acquired by the thirty-third month. A replication of this study by Bain (1936) produced strikingly similar results. Both scholars acknowledge

that the infant's use of "I" is social. The "I" refers to the self-as-interactor, not to the bodily self. In fact, Bain contends that the bodily self as object has only the vaguest meaning for an infant. This view is also supported by Piaget (1926) who maintains that a child's earliest speech is egocentric speech (providing pleasure primarily for the speaker). Whereas Cooley and Bain address themselves to children under three, Piaget contends that this is a characteristic of children's speech through the ages of six or seven. This egocentric trait has also been discussed by Peevers and Secord (1973) who note that preschool children appear to have little appreciation of other persons as distinct unique individuals and react to them more in terms of their material possessions and social setting.

The importance of individual self in the early development of social self seems well established in the literature. However, empirical manifestations of this theoretical phenomenon appear lacking. Although both Cooley and Bain observe pronouns as indicators of social self development, their observations are at best sketchy. Each's observations are also carried out on a single child under three years of age. This research will examine the use of personal pronouns in a much larger sample of children six years of age. It is hypothesized that the child's use of personal pronouns will reflect an emphasis and awareness of the social self as actor. The self as subject will be less salient at this stage of development.

60 percent of the mother's personal references are directly to the child in the form of "you". Pronominal references to the immediate other are followed in frequency by references to self (I, me, we, us) and specific other (he, she, him, her). Usage of these two pronominal groupings is approximately equal. It can be noted that, unlike the child, the mother is just as likely to use "we" as she is to use "I".

Table 2 about here

Application of the contagious Poisson to the ordered distribution of pronominal forms indicates that the distribution is not of the Poisson type (Coleman, 1964). The fit is extremely poor. This poor fit can, no doubt, be attributed to the child's excessive use of "I" and the mother's excessive use of "you". To more fully understand the data, it will be helpful to compare the use of personal references in mother-child conversation with the adult pattern as shown by college students (Table 2) (Allen and Guy, forthcoming). Contrary to both the mother's and the child's patterns, the order of pronoun use for the college student is self, partner, specific other and general other, and finally we-group. The general frequency of pronominal references is one word in ten. In the mother-child conversation, this pattern is drastically changed. The rate of pronoun use is one word in seven, or approximately 43 percent greater. The most extreme and consistent differences in the mother-child and adult

patterns can be viewed in the distributions of pronominal references to self, immediate other, and specific other. Both boys and girls maintain a higher rate of reference to self and specific other than do college students. However, the child's use of immediate other references is considerably lower than that of the college student. The mother's pronominal pattern (when talking to her child) is also quite different from that of the student. Like the child, the mother's use of specific other references is considerably higher than that of the college student. In contrast to the child, the mother's use of self references is considerably lower than that of the student whereas her use of immediate other references is significantly higher. Examining just the mother-child dyads, it is interesting to note that the mother's level of self reference is reciprocal to the child's level of reference to the mother. This is an unexpected finding which leads us to guess that the mother is effectively sharpening the child's sense of self, while removing herself from consideration. This process then deflects the child's attention to third persons as specific others, and may be a mechanism to overcome and remove the mother-child monopoly of the pre-school years. This strategy should eventually lead the child to acquire a pattern of pronominal references similar to that of the college student.

Nominative versus Accusative Pronominal References

The grammatical form of the pronoun can also assist in evaluating social self development. In the case of the nominative forms,

Method

Six year olds and their mothers were paired in 128 unique dyads and were asked to talk together on any topic for approximately five minutes. They were told that the purpose of the research was to learn how mothers and children talk to each other. The 128 dyads were evenly divided among black and white families. They were almost evenly divided by sex of child (males = 65; females = 63). Care was taken to insure that in each dyad the six year old was either an only child or an oldest child. This precaution was taken in order to avoid variation in language patterns attributable to imitating older siblings. All of the children had completed kindegarten and were normal in speech, hearing, and vision as were their mothers.

At the onset of the researchers' visit, each child was promised a small gift (to be presented at the end of the visit) as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. Each child was also promised the opportunity to listen to the tape recording.[1] The promises of a gift and playback of the recording served as motivating forces for the children with one exception. One hyperactive boy refused to listen to the recording and seemed uninterested in receiving a gift.

Each of the 128 samples was carefully transcribed from the tape recording by a team of two researchers and then rechecked

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[1]The primary purpose of the playback was to identify doubtful words for the typewritten transcript.

against the original tapes. These transcripts were coded onto computer cards and verified. The researchers then prepared a computer program to sort and count all words in the records, identifying all inputs as mother's or child's. The data were processed on a Xerox Sigma 9 and on an IBM 360/65.

Results and Discussion

An examination of the average use of pronoun forms per dyad by race and sex shows a clear and distinct preference on the part of the child for self reference (Table 1). The most frequently used pronoun by the child is "I", clearly establishing self as actor. The combined usage of self-reference pronouns (I, me, we, us) exceeds the usage of all other pronouns (you, they, them, he, she, him, her). Self-reference pronouns are followed in usage by specific other references (he, she, him, her). The least used pronominal references by the child are references to the immediate other (you) and to the generalized other (they, them).

Table 1 about here

An examination of the mother's pronominal usage shows a markedly different pattern. The mother seems to forget herself, and to project socially to and for the child because her self references are relatively infrequent, and her reference to the immediate other is almost obsessively predominant. Approximately

"I", "we", "they", "he", and "she", the pronoun is usually the initial word of a clause or sentence. In general, the person indicated in the nominative case is the actor or source of action. The action may be social, physical, or mental; or it may simply indicate a condition or characteristic of the subject. But there is at least an implicit projection from the subject to the external realm.

A similar but complementary function may be ascribed to the accusative pronominal forms, "me", "us", "them", "him", and "her". This form denotes a person who is the target or recipient of action. The social significance of this position is that of the second term, or the inferior term of the exchange. In the case of social action, the object is the essential but lesser half, of which the source of action is the primary half.

Table 3 about here

Categorizing pronominal references as nominative or accusative and examining the data from this perspective, a decidedly higher proportion of nominative forms can be found. This preference for the nominative over the accusative is somewhat greater for the child's speech patterns than for the mother's although it is manifest in both. This pattern is similar for all persons, black and white, male and female. The child's greatest preference for the nominative over the accusative form is for self references (I, me,

we, us) with a mean ratio of 4.70:1. These data suggest that the child as social actor is mainly the source of action and is less frequently the object of action. The mother's mean ratio for self references is much lower (2.80:1), suggesting a greater tendency to view self as both subject and object. By contrast, the child's use of the generalized other (they, them) shows a mean ratio of 2.25:1, suggesting a more equal distribution of the nominative-accusative forms. This tendency towards equalization is somewhat misleading though. A more accurate interpretation of the data would make reference to an underdeveloped generalized other. In other words, the generalized other does not seem to be adequately developed at this age. For the child's use of specific other pronouns (he, she, him, her), the ratio is most erratic. This ratio is much higher for blacks than for whites. It is also considerably higher for males than for females. The data suggest that perception of the specific other as object is in the process of developing and will precede full development of the generalized other. Additionally, females and whites appear to be acquiring this perception more rapidly than males and blacks.

Conclusion

The data tend to support the crux of Mead's discussion describing the development of the social self. The "I" is the source of action and appears to develop first. The individual as subject rather than object dominates in the child's use of pronouns. The "me" as the recipient of action is relatively underdeveloped

at six. This dimension of self appears to develop at a later stage. The child is rapidly gaining awareness of the specific other. However, his awareness of the generalized other is developing more slowly. Perhaps most surprising is the child's seeming lack of awareness of the immediate other. This lack of awareness appears to be artifically induced by the mother who uses excessively the immediate other reference. The mother's extremely high use of this reference (you) and her extremely low use of self references seem to effect a complementary pattern in the child. More specifically, the child is impelled into a much more frequent reference to self, and conceivably, to an increased level of assertiveness and action. If this is the case, we may have evidence of a social weaning process which readies the child for a higher level of autonomy and assertiveness as he prepares to take on a new role within the formal educational system. Certainly, the data lend empirical evidence to Mead's discussion regarding the development and projection of the social self.

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Table 1

Average Pronoun Forms Per Dyad By Race and Sex

Dyads	N		I	me	you	they	them	we	us	he/she	him/her
			(128 dyads, 5 minutes each)								
black	64	child	14	4	4	2	1	6	1	10	1
		mother	5	4	41	1	1	3	0	10	2
white	64	child	16	3	6	3	1	5	1	8	2
		mother	6	2	36	4	2	5	1	11	2
male	65	child	14	3	4	2	1	4	1	9	1
		mother	5	3	38	3	2	4	0	11	2
female	63	child	17	4	6	2	1	7	1	9	2
		mother	6	3	40	2	1	4	1	10	2

Table 2

Personal Reference in College Student and Mother-Child Conversation

(Reference rate per 1000 words)

Personal Reference	College Student conversation		Mother-child conversation with six year old children			
	Men	Women	Children: boys	girls	Mother of: boys	girls
Self	41	42	63	62	16	14
Partner	24	28	18	19	89	71
Specific other	12	12	38	32	26	18
General other	12	12	14	23	10	6
We-group	6	6	17	9	9	7
Pronouns/ 1000 words	95	101	150	145	150	116
Talk dyads	74	74	65	63	64	64
Total words	35310	31141	16185	20979	28535	34461
Words/person	477	421	249	333	439	547

Table 3

Ratio of Nominative to Accusative Form of Pronouns

	black		white	
	child	mother	child	mother
I/me	3.5	1.2	5.3	3.0
we/us	6.0	3/0	5.0	5.0
they/them	2.0	1.0	3.0	2.0
he,she/him,her	10.0	5.0	4.0	5.5

	male		female	
	child	mother	child	mother
I/me	2.6	1.6	4.3	2.0
we/us	4.0	4/0	7.0	4.0
they/them	2.0	1.5	2.0	2.0
he,she/him,her	9.0	5.5	4.5	5.0